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PARIS FOR WALLER, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: SYRIA 2007 ELECTIONS PRIMER

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[¶](#)B. 05 DAMASCUS 3955

CLASSIFIED BY: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES MICHAEL H. CORBIN FOR REASONS 1.4 B/D

[¶](#)11. (SBU) THE SARG IS EXPECTED TO HOLD THREE SETS OF ELECTIONS IN 2007, STARTING WITH THE PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY IN APRIL, FOLLOWED BY A PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM EXPECTED TO TAKE PLACE IN LATE MAY OR EARLY JUNE, AND MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS EXPECTED IN AUGUST. THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXPLANATION OF THE ELECTION PROCEDURE.

[¶](#)12. (SBU) PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION/BECOMING A CANDIDATE: THE ELECTION IS EXPECTED TO TAKE PLACE SOMETIME IN MID-APRIL FOR ALL OF THE 250 SEATS IN THE UNICAMERAL PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY. TERMS ARE FOR FOUR YEARS. A PRESIDENTIAL DECREE, EXPECTED IN COMING MONTHS, WILL SET THE EXACT DATE OF THE ELECTION. ONCE THE DECREE HAS BEEN ISSUED, PROSPECTIVE CANDIDATES IN DAMASCUS AND SYRIA'S 14 PROVINCES HAVE 10 DAYS TO OBTAIN A WRITTEN SECURITY CLEARANCE INDICATING THAT THEY HAVE NO PRIOR CONVICTIONS AND THEN TO FILE THEIR CANDIDACY PAPERS IN THE LOCATION WHERE THEY WISH TO SEEK OFFICE. CANDIDATES, EVEN THOSE FROM THE BA'ATH PARTY, DO NOT NORMALLY DECLARE PARTY AFFILIATION WHEN THEY FILE PAPERS. THE FILING PROCESS TRIGGERS AN INVESTIGATION BY LOCAL SECURITY OFFICIALS, WHO DO A BACKGROUND CHECK ON THE PROSPECTIVE CANDIDATE, INCLUDING HIS/HER FAMILY, EDUCATION, PROFESSION, AND AFFILIATIONS, ACCORDING TO OUR CONTACTS. ONCE THE INVESTIGATION IS COMPLETED, THE GOVERNORS OFFICE IN THE CANDIDATE'S PROVINCE ISSUES AUTHORIZATION FOR THE CANDIDATE TO ENTER THE CAMPAIGN.

[¶](#)13. (C) CAMPAIGN SEASON: CAMPAIGNING STARTS AS SOON AS A CANDIDATE IS ENDORSED BY THE GOVERNOR OR THE DESIGNATED CANDIDACY COMMITTEE, USUALLY THREE TO FOUR WEEKS BEFORE THE ELECTION DATE. CAMPAIGNING ENDS 48 HOURS PRIOR TO THE 1.5-DAY ELECTIONS. THE CEILING FOR ELECTION ADVERTISING WAS ESTABLISHED AT JUST UNDER 60,000 USD, AND THERE IS A FINE FOR CANDIDATES WHO PROVIDE SERVICES AND FINANCIAL OR IN-KIND DONATIONS TO INDIVIDUALS, SOCIETIES, CLUBS, NON-OFFICIAL ENTITIES AND OTHERS. FOR THE MOST PART, CANDIDATES CAMPAIGN USING OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL MEDIA, BILLBOARDS AND POSTERS. THEY ALSO SET UP TENTS EQUIPPED WITH WATER PIPES AND TEA STANDS WHERE CANDIDATES EXPLAIN THEIR PLATFORMS TO VOTERS. SOME CANDIDATES DO LITTLE OR NO CAMPAIGNING, RELYING ON BACK ROOM DEALS WITH REGIME OFFICIALS TO ENSURE THEIR ELECTION, ACCORDING TO OUR CONTACTS.

[¶](#)14. (C) BA'ATHISTS, PEASANTS, WORKERS: THE SARG HAS DESIGNED AN OPAQUE "LIST SYSTEM" THAT ALLOWS IT TO MANIPULATE VOTING AND MAINTAIN CONTROL OVER THE PARLIAMENT. IN 1980, THE SARG

DECIDED THAT INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES COULD HOLD UP TO 83 LEGISLATIVE SEATS, WHILE THE REMAINING 167 SEATS NEEDED FOR AN ABSOLUTE MAJORITY ARE RESERVED FOR MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL PROGRESSIVE FRONT (NPF), WHICH IS A COALITION OF PARTIES LED BY THE ARAB SOCIALIST BA'ATH PARTY. (NOTE: ARTICLE 8 OF THE SYRIAN CONSTITUTION STIPULATES THAT THE BA'ATH PARTY LEADS THE STATE AND SOCIETY. END NOTE.) IN THE CURRENT PARLIAMENT, THE BA'ATH PARTY HOLDS 132 SEATS, OTHER NPF GROUPS HAVE 35 SEATS, AND INDEPENDENTS CONTROL 83 SEATS, ACCORDING TO POST FIGURES. ARTICLE 53 OF THE CONSTITUTION STATES THAT HALF OF THE SEATS ARE DESIGNATED FOR PEASANTS AND WORKERS. WHEN CANDIDATES NAMES ARE PUBLICLY ANNOUNCED, THEY ARE NOT IDENTIFIED BY THEIR POLITICAL AFFILIATION OR CATEGORY. AS ELECTION DAYS DRAWS CLOSER, AGENTS OF CANDIDATES PRINT BALLOT FLYERS WITH NAMES OF THEIR CANDIDATE, OR, IN THE CASE OF THE POLITICAL PARTY, A SLATE OF CANDIDATES. VOTERS MAY TAKE THIS PAPER INTO THE VOTING BOOTH WHERE THEY FILL IN THE NAMES OF THEIR CANDIDATES. WRITE-INS FOR NON-DECLARED CANDIDATES ARE NOT PERMITTED.

15. (C) DEPENDING ON ITS POLITICAL PRIORITIES COUNTRYWIDE, THE BA'ATH PARTY LIST MAY INCLUDE CANDIDATES FOR ALL OF THE SEATS IN THE GOVERNORATE, OR IT MAY FORWARD CANDIDATES FOR ALL BUT A FEW SEATS, WHICH ARE THEN DESIGNATED FOR PEASANTS/WORKERS AND INDEPENDENTS. (COMMENT: THE ASSUMPTION IS THAT THE BA'ATH AND NPF CANDIDATES WILL ALL WIN, LEAVING SOME OPENINGS FOR PEASANTS AND WORKERS WITH PARTY BACKING AND SOME OPENINGS FOR INDEPENDENTS. SLATES MAY APPARENTLY BE EXPANDED OR CUT EVEN AFTER THE FIRST DAY OF VOTING, DEPENDING ON THE BAATH PARTYS COUNTRYWIDE POLITICAL PRIORITIES, ACCORDING TO CONTACTS.)

16. (C) ASIDE FROM NPF CANDIDATES (REPRESENTING THE AUTHORIZED POLITICAL PARTIES), THERE ARE SOME 20 UNOFFICIAL OPPOSITION PARTIES IN SYRIA (REFTEL A AND B), WHICH ARE

TOLERATED BY THE SARG AS LONG AS THEY DO NOT CHALLENGE ITS AUTHORITY AND THE STATUS QUO. CANDIDATES ARE NOT OFFICIALLY ALLOWED TO REPRESENT AN OPPOSITION PARTY, BUT CAN RUN AS INDEPENDENTS. PARTY LISTS ARE NOT ANNOUNCED UNTIL RIGHT BEFORE THE ELECTIONS. WE UNDERSTAND THAT MANY INDIVIDUALS WILL FILE AS CANDIDATES, HOPING THE BA'ATH PARTY WILL CHOSE THEM FOR ITS LISTS.

17. (C) MONITORING: CANDIDATES ARE PERMITTED TO SEND MONITORS TO POLLING PLACES, OBSERVING THE OPENING OF BALLOT BOXES, VOTING, AND THE COUNTING OF BALLOTS. (COMMENT: THIS IS THE MOST ONEROUS BURDEN ON CANDIDATES AND CENTRAL TO PREVENTING FRAUD, GIVEN THAT THE CENTRAL ELECTION COMMITTEE IS REQUIRED BY LAW TO CREATE A VOTING CENTER FOR EVERY 1,000 VOTERS. ADDITIONALLY, IN SOME DESERT AREAS, MOBILE POLLING PLACES ARE CREATED TO ACCESS BEDOUIN VOTERS. END COMMENT.) SO FAR, THE SARG HAS NOT COMMENTED PUBLICLY ABOUT INTERNATIONAL MONITORS. FROM OUR EC CONTACTS, WE ALSO UNDERSTAND THAT SEVERAL VISITING EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY GROUPS HAVE OFFERED TO MONITOR THE ELECTIONS, BUT HAVE RECEIVED NO AFFIRMATIVE RESPONSE FROM THEIR SARG INTERLOCUTORS. THE RATE OF PARTICIPATION IN THE 2003 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS WAS 63.5 PERCENT OF 7 MILLION ELIGIBLE VOTERS, ACCORDING TO UNDP STATISTICS. VOTING IS NON-COMPULSORY. ALL CITIZENS 18 AND OVER HAVE THE RIGHT TO VOTE, EXCEPT IMMIGRANTS, AND ACTIVE-DUTY POLICE AND MILITARY.

18. (SBU) PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM: ONCE THE NEW PARLIAMENT IS SEATED, THE BAATH PARTYS REGIONAL COMMAND IS REQUIRED BY THE CONSTITUTION TO SUBMIT TO THE PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY THE NAME OF A CANDIDATE FOR THE NEXT SEVEN-YEAR PRESIDENTIAL TERM. THE SPEAKER OF PARLIAMENT MUST THEN CALL FOR A PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM ON THIS SINGLE CANDIDATE, NO LESS THAN 30 DAYS AND NO MORE THAN 60 DAYS BEFORE THE EXPIRY OF THE TERM OF THE SITTING PRESIDENT. (NOTE: SYRIA'S PRESIDENT BASHAR AL-ASAD TOOK OFFICE ON JULY 17, 2000, MEANING THAT THE REFERENDUM SHOULD THEORETICALLY OCCUR BETWEEN MAY 17 AND JUNE 16. END NOTE.) UNDER ARTICLE 84, THE CANDIDATE BECOMES PRESIDENT BY OBTAINING THE ABSOLUTE MAJORITY OF THE VOTES CAST. IF HE DOES NOT OBTAIN THIS MAJORITY, THEN A NEW CANDIDATE IS NOMINATED VIA THE SAME PROCEDURES. IN THE JULY 2000 REFERENDUM, JUST A MONTH AFTER THE DEATH OF HIS FATHER AND IN

THE MIDST OF THIS PROCESS, ASAD RECEIVED MORE THAN 97 PERCENT OF THE VOTE, WITH PARTICIPATION BY 94.6 PERCENT OF ELIGIBLE VOTERS, ACCORDING TO SARG FIGURES.

¶9. (SBU) MUNICIPAL ELECTION: MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS FOR MORE THAN 15,000 SEATS ON LOCAL COUNCILS ARE EXPECTED TO BE HELD IN AUGUST, ACCORDING TO LOCAL PRESS REPORTS. LOCAL ELECTIONS WERE LAST HELD IN 2003 IN 14 GOVERNORATE COUNCILS, 95 CITY COUNCIL, 231 TOWN COUNCILS, AND 181 VILLAGE COUNCILS.

AS WITH IN PARLIAMENT, PEASANTS AND WORKERS WERE ALLOCATED A CERTAIN NUMBER OF SEATS, ALTHOUGH AN EXPERIMENTAL "OPEN LISTS" SYSTEM WAS USED IN TOWNS AND VILLAGES. EVER SINCE THE JUNE 2005 BA'ATH PARTY CONGRESS, THERE HAS BEEN SPECULATION ABOUT A POLITICAL DECISION TO APPLY THE OPEN LISTS SYSTEM AT ALL LEVELS OF THE 2007 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS. IN 2003 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS, 37 PERCENT OF ELIGIBLE VOTERS PARTICIPATED AT THE PROVINCIAL LEVEL, WITH A LOWER PARTICIPATION RATE IN CITIES, TOWNS AND VILLAGES.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: SINCE THE BA'ATH PARTY CONGRESS IN 2005, THERE HAS BEEN SPECULATION ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF A NEW POLITICAL PARTIES LAW THAT WOULD PERMIT THE ESTABLISHMENT OF NEW PARTIES, PROVIDED THEY RELINQUISH RELIGIOUS AND NATIONALIST PLATFORMS. OUR CONTACTS TELL US THAT THOSE PLANS HAVE BEEN PUT ON HOLD. WE WILL REPORT ON ELECTION-RELATED REFORMS VIA SEPTEL IF AND AS THEY EMERGE.

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